

[By Jonathan Weisman](#)

Senior senators met Thursday in Havana with President Raúl Castro of Cuba and with an imprisoned American aid worker, but they reported no immediate breakthrough on Friday on winning the American's freedom.

Senators Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, and Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama, met with Mr. Castro for more than two hours on Thursday night, the first high-level meeting between the two countries in nearly two years. The senators offered to take the aid worker, Alan Gross, home with them.

"I said if he'd like us to take this issue off his hand, we'd be happy to take Mr. Gross on the plane when we left," Mr. Leahy said in a phone interview from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. "He basically said, 'Nice try.' "

Senator Chris Coons, a Delaware Democrat who along with Mr. Leahy met Thursday with Mr. Gross at a military prison hospital in Havana, the capital, said prison conditions "are not great." But he said Mr. Gross appeared to be treated better than a typical Cuban prisoner.

"He's lost a stunning amount of weight," Mr. Coons said. "He is very thin."

The senators are part of a group of six lawmakers traveling to Cuba, Haiti and Colombia to widen agricultural trade with Cuba, inspect recovery efforts from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and discuss antidrug efforts in South America. Also in the group are Senator Kent Conrad, Democrat of North Dakota, and Representatives Xavier Becerra, Democrat of California, and Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont.

The meeting with Mr. Castro was the first high-level contact since former President Jimmy Carter dined with him in April 2010. The imprisonment of Mr. Gross has chilled any thaw that might have happened in the wake of the resignation of the longtime Cuban leader, Fidel Castro,

and the assumption of the presidency by his brother Raúl.

Mr. Gross, a Maryland resident, was sentenced last year to 15 years in prison after his arrest in 2009 while serving on a democracy-building project financed by the United States Agency for International Development. Mr. Gross, who was accused of bringing satellite and other communications equipment to Cuba, was convicted of crimes against the state, not espionage. Cuban authorities "do not consider Alan Gross a spy," Mr. Leahy said.

Mr. Gross had traveled to Cuba five times in 2009 under his own name before his arrest.

When the lawmakers met with the Cuban foreign minister and the president of the National Assembly, Mr. Coons said, Cuban officials tried to raise other issues, like expanding cooperation on drug seizures, oil exploration, trade liberalization and immigration.

Mr. Coons said he was firm that Mr. Gross's release must come first. "My message back was before anything else can be discussed, we have to make progress on our humanitarian concerns, and that means releasing Alan Gross," he said.

But Mr. Leahy said he told Mr. Castro that neither country should let one issue stand in the way of progress because that would let political elements on either side thwart warming ties.

Mr. Coons said the main goal of the talks was to assure Mr. Gross that his case remains the main impediment to diplomatic overtures. Mr. Gross told his visitors that he had walked eight miles that morning, pacing in the limited space he has, and that he does pull-ups on a metal grate in his one hour a day outside.

He gave Mr. Leahy and Mr. Coons bracelets he had woven from small plastic rings he snapped off water bottle tops.

"He wanted us to keep them to remember him by," Mr. Coons said. "I have mine in my pocket."